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ABSTRACT

This study was aimed at measuring the relative contribution of life events (potential stressors) and social support to the use of coercive control behaviors by mothers. Social support was measured both in terms of mothers' embeddedness in their social environment and of their preceived lack of support. Conflictual relationships were also identified. Mothers were asked to evaluate the degree of aversion or gratification found in each of the life events they had encountered the previous year; they also gauged the amount of energy invested in coping with those events. Coercion control behavior scores were obtained by asking the mothers to report the relative frequency of use of coercive and inductive strategies when dealing with their children in situations similar to those depicted in eight vignettes. Educational level, number of hours worked outside the home, size of the social support environment, and harmonious social ties correlate negatively with mothers' reported uses of coercive control strategies with their children. Number of negative life events, amount of energy invested in them, perceived degree of conflict with others, and perceived lack of support correlate positively. The association between lack of support and coercive scores is stronger under high conditions of stress. Amount of schooling, perceived lack of support, negative events, and perceived conflicts are the best predictors of mothers' use of coercive behaviors in attempts to control their children's behaviors. (Author/BG)

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Using coercive behaviors with children: stressors, conflictual relationships and lack of support in the life of mothers.

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Abstract

This study was aimed at measuring the relative contribution of life events (potential stressors) and social support to the use of coercive control behaviors by mothers. Social support was measured both in terms of mothers' embeddedness in their social environment and of their perceived lack of support; conflictual relationships were also identified. Mothers were asked to evaluate the degree of aversion or gratification of each of the life events they had encountered the previous year; they also gauged the amount of energy invested in coping with those events. Coercion control behavior scores were obtained by asking the mothers to report the relative frequency of use of coercive and inductive strategies when dealing with their child in situations similar to those depicted in eight vignettes. Educational level, number of hours worked outside home, size of the social support environment and harmonious social ties correlate negatively with mothers' reported use of coercive control strategies of their children. Number of negative life events, amount of energy invested in those, perceived degree of conflict with others and perceived lack of support correlate positively. The association between lack of support and coercive scores is stronger under high conditions of stress. Schooling, with lack of support, negative events and perceived conflicts are the best predictors of mothers using coercive behaviors in attempting to control their child's behaviors.

Introduction

It is no great challenge to propose that one of the main parental tasks in children socialization is to control their behaviors in infinite number of situations. Adoption and utilization of specific control strategies by parents depend on a host of factors: characteristics of the parent and of the child (Seagull,1987), the nature of the situation (Grusec & Kuczynski, 1980), changes in the economy (Steinberg, Catalano & Dooley, 1981) belonging to a social class, and sharing specific educational values(Gecas, 1979; Lambert, Hammers & Frasure-Smith, 1979) would certainly appear on top of the list. Lately, social embeddedness and perceived social support, and the nature of stressors encountered by the parents have retained the attention of researchers.

Garbarino (1977) has asserted that isolation of family from potent support systems is a necessary condition of child abuse. He and Sherman (1980) found that high risk neighborhoods for child maltreatment were inhabitated by more families isolated from the social environment. Chamberland, Beaudry & Bouchard (1986) confirmed this epidemiological finding; mothers of high risks neighborhoods declared much more difficulties in mobilizing help when in need, and reported the presence of conflictual relationships in their social network in larger number. Social networks of mothers living in high risk neighborhoods were also found to be more restricted to their own family of origin than mothers of low risk urban areas of same social class. Colletta (1979) reported that newly divorced mothers better embedded in a network of friends and relatives, and better supported by their husband were less punitive with their child. Comparing single parent and two parent family mothers, Weinraub & Wolf (1983) concluded that married women who were more satisfied with emotional support were "more in control" (in terms of child compliance and mothers' effective directions) when interacting with their child. Total parenting support was positively asociated with maternal control in single parent families only. These families were also declared as more under stress; it is then possible that the presumed effect of support was more potent under higher conditions of stress as the buffering hypothesis would suggest (Barrera, 1986).

Research directly measuring isolation of families suspected or convicted of violence

against their children or admitting using it, suggests that lack of social support may play an important role (Smith, Hanson & Noble, 1974; Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980). Other works dealing with clinical samples of mothers and children referred for reciprocal utilization of aggressive behaviors (Wahler 1980; Wahler & Dumas, 1983) demonstrated that mothers' insularity as measured by their degree of poverty , by their social isolation and by their participation to conflictual social exchanges(Dumas, in press) contribute for much in predicting mothers' reactions to their children agressive behaviors.

As for stress experienced by parents, it has been shown that parents reporting violence with their children had lost their job or been unemployed in larger number in the period preceeding collection of data (Straus *et al*., 1980). Similarly, frustration at work has been related to the use of harsher disciplinary strategies by fathers Kemper & Reichler (1976). On the other hand, work absorption tends to make fathers more impatient in their interactions with their child (Heath, 1977). Presence of conflictual relationships, as illustrated by Whaler & his colleagues (1980, 1983), may certainly also be counted as a stressor and has been shown to be related to mothers' use of coercive behaviors.

Single family mothers overburdened by financial problems, by children excessive demands and by the stress imposed by the former partner become more erratic and more demanding in their attempts to control the child (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978). Also with non-clinical samples, Weinraub & Wolf (1983) reported that "more potentially stressfull life events" were correlated with "less positive parent-child communication" (ease and spontaneity of mothers', verbal and non-verbal communication as well as acknowledgement of their child communication) (p.1301-1304). "Maternal control " was not associated with stress scores.

The goal of this study is to identify with a larger non-clinical sample of mothers the relative strenght of the presumed association between the occurrence of life events, the perception of lack of social support and the reported use of coercive behaviors by mothers. As most stydy measured stress indirectly, primarily relying on mothers status, this study uses a direct measure of potential stressors and requires mothers to evaluate both the energy

invested in coping with these events and their degree of aversiveness. In addition, a careful inventory of support ressources is completed as to insure a thorough evaluation of mothers' social support. Mothers' subjective appraisal of support in terms of its availability is also considered. At last, the interaction between stress and social support is examined in terms of its effect on coercive scores.

We hypothesized that 1) higher "stress" scores would be associated with more coercive behaviors; 2) lower social embeddedness and perceived social support would also be related to more frequent use of authoritarian conducts; 3) this last association would be more important for mothers declaring a high degree of stress. Demographic variables, such as education (schooling), number of children, income and occupation were also considered as to evaluate their relative weight in predicting coercion scores. Family structure has not yet been considered in the data analysis.

Method

Subjects. One hundred and six (106) mothers participated in this study. They were recruted by systematically canevassing previously choosen census tract areas. Only those mothers with children between 4 and 14 years old (Σ=8.5 years; SD: 3.8) were invited to participate. Acceptation rate was of 73%. Mothers' age varied from 22 to 60 years old, with a mean of 36 years old. One third (33.5%) of the mothers declared an income of less than $10,000. (canadian), while 41.2% evaluated that their income was between $10,000. and $25,000.; others earned more than $25,000. Average educational level was 11 years.

Procedures. Mothers were told that the main objective of the study was to assess the various aspects of their life as parents. A female interviewer met the mother at her home. The interview was 1.5 hour long and the questionaire forms were filled out by the mother with the help of the interviewer. If she had more than one child, the mother was invited to choose a (target) child to whom she referred troughout the interview.

Measures. *Parental Control Behaviors (PCB).* A questionaire (PCB) was used to

assess the frequency of utilization of coercive and inductive control behaviors as reported by the parents (for details regarding construction and validity tests, refer to Tessier, Pilon & Fecteau, 1985; Bouchard, 1987). Eight vignettes were presented to the mothers in which a conflictual or problematical parent-child encounter was depicted. For each of these situations, six possible parental reactions were described to the mothers. Three of these reactions were coercive; they included behaviors such as threatening, humiliating, blaming, commanding the child. Three others were inductive: they comprised behaviors such as giving or asking for explanations, asking the child about his/her point of view, suggesting alternative behaviors to the child. The mothers had to evaluate their own frequency of use of each of these possible strategies in similar day life situations on a scale ranging from 1 (very rarely) to 5 (very often). Only coercive scores are reported here. Lowest possible individual score is 24, highest is 120.

Stress. Holmes and Rahe (1967) inventory of life events was used to assess those potentially stressful episodes experienced by mothers during the previous year. Thirteen (13) new item were added to the 43 original ones; they were designed to evaluate events specifically relevant to a parent of a 4 to 14 years old child. As suggested by the authors, mothers were first asked to identified those item which they had experienced. This procedure permitted to establish two scores: total number of events, and sommation of weighted scores attributed to each reported item depending on their presumed degree of disturbance (these last scores were preestablished by Holmes & Rahe and are not used in the present analysis). In addition to this usual procedure, mothers were asked to assess the degree of energy invested in each event (from 10[very little] to 100 [very much]) and to evaluate their respective degree of aversiveness (from -3 [very aversive] to +3 [very gratifying]). This allowed the construction of additional stress related scores: number of positive and negative events, ratio of those, sum of energy invested in encountering all events, sum of energy invested in coping with negative, and positive events.

Social support and nuisance. A repertoire of persons assisting or annoying the mothers, in child as well as in non-child related areas, was first completed by mothers. They were asked to identify those persons on which they could rely in each of four support

functions presented in sequence (emotional, instrumental, normative, recreational). After identification, the status of the person was established (family member, kin, friend, workmate, acquaintance, other). This first part of the social support measurement lead to the formulation of scores related to the social embeddedness of mothers (Barrera, 1986): size of the supporting social environment (number of helping persons), number of helping persons per support function and percent of helping persons by status. Mothers were also invited to identify those in their social environment who they perceived more as a nuisance than as a help. Scores were derived in terms of the ratio of conflictual relationships (nuisance / helping + nuisance X 100) reported by the subjects.

A series of question also dealt with *perceived* social support as estimated by the mothers. They evaluated how often they failed to find support when in need of it. This was done using a scale from 1 (very rarely) to 6 (very often). This type of social support measurement has been identified as powerful in differentiating degrees of well-being in respondents (Turner, 1981).

Demographic characteristics. Schooling and income levels were documented. In addition, work status was specified in terms of full or partial time employment (numbers of hours / week), unemployment and work at home or outside (numbers of hours / week). Number of children, age of the mother at child birth and present mother's age were also collected.

Results

Demographic variables and parental control behaviors

Mean coercive score is 59 (/ 120). Lowest score is at 25 and the highest at 96 (SD: 25). There are significant Pearson correlations between coercive scores and schooling level (r: -.32, p<.001), and work status (the more the mothers work outside, the less they declare instances of coercion with their child; r: -.28, p<.01). The number of children[1] is significantly related to the use of coercive strategies as well (.24, p<.05). Income does not present a constant relationship with reported coercive scores (Table 1). Results also confirm

[1] There is no correlation between children age and coercion scores

that the more the mothers have attended school, the more they work outside and the less they have several children.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Stress and parental control behavior

Mothers report a mean of nine (9) life events per year. Around half of those are judged aversive by the mothers. Invested energy scores for those negative events is higher (503) than the one for positive events (418). Coorelations with coercive score reach significance only between total aversive events and sum of invested energy in aversive events(r: .31,.27 p<.001) (Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Social support and parental control behaviors

As illustrated in table 3, the more mothers perceive conflictual relationships with their social environment, the more they declare being coercive towards their child(r: .26, p<.01). Such a positive correlation is also found between coercive score and the perception by mothers of lacking social support (r: .32, p<.001), and the ratio of kins in mothers' social environment (r: .26, p<.01). On the opposite, the number of non-conflictual relationships and the total number of persons in the social support environment is found negatively correlated with the use of negative control behaviors by the mothers (r: .18, .20, p<.05).

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Interaction between social support and stress

Four subgroups of mothers are extracted in terms of their scores on "perceived lack of support" and of their scores on " energy invested in facing aversive events". The first group is composed of mothers scoring high (scoring higher than total group mean score) both on lack of support and on stress (N= 27); the second group comprises mothers scoring low (scoring lower than total group mean score) on both variables (N=32). A third group gathers mothers low on stress and high on lack of support (N=15). Finally, a fourth group includes mothers

high on stress and low on lack of social support (N= 27). Anova (two way interactions) reveals that there is a significant difference on reported use of coercive conducts between mothers declaring a low and high degree of energy invested in aversive events (54.6 vs 63.6; df (1,97); F=8.38, p<.005) (Table 4). A two way interaction is also revealed; mothers reporting a higher lack of social support also recount more frequent use of coercive behaviors than other mothers under high level of negative stress (Figure 1) (68.7 vs 58.5; df (1, 97); F= 4.29. p<.04).

INSERT TABLE 4 AND FIGURE 1 HERE

Relative contribution of demographic and psycho-social variables

A multiple regression analysis was conducted as to evaluate the relative contribution of each of the variables previously significantly associated with the utilization of coercive control behaviors by mothers. Inspection of Table 4 shows that 30% of the variance is explained by five variables. Of those, low schooling and perceived lack of support cover 17% of the variance. The number of children in the family, the amount of energy allowed to negative events and the ratio of conflictual relationships explain 13% of the variance.

Discussion

Demographic variables and mothers' use of coercive strategies. As expected, the use of coercive behaviors by mothers increases with the number of children at home. This is consonant with results reported by Scheck & Emerick (1976, in Burr, Hill, Nye & Reiss, 1979): adolescent of larger families perceive their parents' behaviors as less communicative and more controlling. This is also harmonious with results obtained by Bouchard (1987) in a concurrent study; mothers reported using more coercive behaviors towards their child as their home obtained a higher density score. More crowded environments are usually less conducive to cooperation (Baum, Aiello & Calesnik, 1978).

Schooling level is negatively related to the use of authoritarian strategies; the more the mothers attended school, the less they declare using coercive conducts in disciplining their child. Similarly, the more mothers work outside home the lower is their coercion score. These

last results are of no surprise (Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Laosa, 1983). A better access to published sources of information regarding child control, and a more comfortable economic and occupational environment would favor adoption and use of inductive strategies by mothers. Involvment and patience with children which are said to be two generic parental competences (Belsky, Robins & Gamble, 1984) are certainly easier to find in mothers showing greater control and finding appropriate ressources in their environment. In turn these ressources are easier to locate and to use for more educated persons and for those being able to afford them. In fact, in identifying ties between number of children, schooling and hours worked outside home with coercion, conditions of poverty are clearly in line.

Life events and the use of coercion. As predicted stress as experienced by the mothers relate to their coercion scores. However, the relationship between those two variables is quite specific; indeed, only negative events reported by mothers, either in terms of number or of invested energy in coping with their aversiveness, are related to the use of autoritharian behaviors. This is reminiscent of the epidemiological debate surrounding the role of life events in the prediction of psychologial or psychosomatic symptoms in populations (Dean & Lin, 1977; Liem & Liem, 1978; Tausig, 1982). Negative life events seem to be better predictors of adaptation problems than general or positive events. It is worth underlying that experiencing more aversive life events has been related to conditions of poverty (Liem & Liem, 1978).

The correlational nature of the results does not permit to eliminate a possible role that could be attributed to mothers' psychological characteristics; it is possible that the link between more frequent use of coercion and of more negative events itself depends on the presence of a third variable like the depressive mood of respondents. Depressive persons tend to judge events that they have to face in a less favorable way, and (Panaccione & Wahler, 1986) have already documented the role played by depression in the mothers' perception of their child in their use of aggressive behaviors.

Social support and coercion scores. Perceived lack of support correlates

the highest among social support variables with the use of coercive behaviors by mothers. Turner (1981) has underlined the importance of personal appraisal of social support in predicting one's well-being. More lately, Panaccione and Whaler (1986) have lately reported that both the behaviors of the child and the mothers' aversive extrafamilial contacts are associated to mothers' aversive ractions toward their child. Wahler and his colleagues (1980, 1983) had previously reported that the presence of antagonistic relationships in the mothers' network was linked to longer agressive outbursts. Present results support the insularity thesis in a non-clinical population: the perceived degree of social conflicts, as well as the preponderance of kins in the social network, are linked to more coercion.

Simultaneously, the number of harmonious social ties and the size of the network are related to less coercive behaviors being reported by mothers. It is worth noting that the ratio of kins in the network is negatively related to education and to the number of hours worked outside the home ($r;-.49, -.39; p<.001$). Again, it is tempting to address the issue of social class and poverty here; education and work would give mothers more opportunities to enlarge and diversify their social environment. It would then help them to escape from conflictual or ambivalent relationships in some areas of their life. However, Seagull(1987), referring to the area of child abuse, warns us against an unequivocal interpretation of such results. In explaining mothers' abusive behaviors, she opposes to the lack of support hypothesis to characterological deficits of the parents in explaining both their abuse or neglect of the child and the abscence of enduring supporting social relationships. Mothers' strategies in dealing with their social environment and with their children would proceed from the same generic abilities.

Social support and stress interaction. Mothers who obtained scores higher than the group mean on negative life events reported using coercive conducts significantly more often than others. However, perceived lack of support did not strongly discriminate between high and low scorers on coercive behaviors. It is only in interaction with a high level of stress that the impact of social support appears. Analogically, this is congruent with most of the published results pertaining to the buffering hypothesis; social support is

then seen as an attenuator of the psychological disturbances acompanying adaptation to hifhly negative life events (Barrera, 1986).

Although separate analyses of data indicate that negative life events can by themselves be used as valid predictors of utilization of coercive strategies by mothers, the use of multiple regression analysis reveals that prediction of this variable rests on a web of interrelated variables; schooling, as reflecting the degree of formal personal preparation in dealing with children and social environment, remains an important predictor, as well as the perceived lack of support. Elsewhere, we have demonstrated how low schooling enhanced the role played by environmental variables such as crowding, socialyy shared educational values, occupational status or size of network in predicting the same coercive scores (Bouchard, 1987). In addition, the number of children and the perceived social conflicts here again contribute, although moderatly, in explaining the variance of coercive scores.

Conclusion

Results of this study strongly suggest that mothers' conditions of life influence their control behaviors towards their children. Perceived lack of support coupled with a high level of stress (in form of negative life events and energy invested in encountering them) are linked with the use of coercive strategies by mothers. Concurrently, the presence of conflictual relationships and of a majority of kins in their social network are also identified as contributing to the use of authority by mothers. Insularity and aversiveness of life events are but not irrelevant to mothers' resorting to punishing strategies. However, as reflected in the regression analysis, schooling in explaining 9% of the variance of coercion scores is an important personal characteristic; it also is in relationship with the number of children in the family and with the number of hours worked outside home.

At last, although not measured here, psychological characteristics of the mothers could significantly contribute to the prediction of both coercive behaviors and the mothers' appraisal of life events and social environmental elements. It is quite clear that an heuristic model of prediction should rely on future efforts to integrate these ontosystemic contributions into the research designs.

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Table 1

Pearson correlations between demographic indices and reported use of coercive control strategies by mothers

	Schooling level	Number of children	Hours worked outside	Coercion scores
Schooling level	——	-.28**	.32***	-.32***
Number of children		——	-.31**	.24*
Hours worked outside			——	-.28**
Coercion scores				——

* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001

Table 2

Life event scores and their Pearson correlations with reported use of coercive strategies by mothers

	Mean score	SD	Min	Max	r
Number of events	9	6	0	34	NS
Invested energy: all events	921	897	0	5640	NS
Number of positive events	5	4	0	18	NS
Invested positive energy	418	485	0	2535	NS
Number of negative events	4	3	0	18	.31***
Invested negative energy	503	622	0	3450	.27***

*** p<.001

Table 3

Social support and conflictual relationships scores and their Pearson correlations with reported use of coercive strategies by mothers

	Mean score	SD	Min	Max	r
Size of network	11	5	2	33	-.18*
N of harmonious relationships	10	5	2	31	-.20*
N of conflictual relationships	1	1	0	5	NS
Ratio of kins	.56	.25	0	1.00	.26**
Perceived lack of support	15	7	4	36	.32***
Perceived degree of conflict	6	3	1	12	.26**

* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001

Table 4

Analysis of variance (two way interaction) on coercive behaviors of mothers according to their reported levels of perceived lack of support and of energy invested in coping with negative life events

	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	p<
Main effects	2675.9	2	1337.9	7.07	.001
Lack of support	633.5	1	633.5	3.34	.07
Negative Life Events	1585.8	1	1585.8	8.38	.005
2-Way interaction	812.3	1	812.3	4.29	.04
Lack x Negative	812.3	1	812.3	4.29	.04
Residual	18350.4	97	189.2		
Total	21838.5	100	218.4		